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ABSTRACT

The educational benefits of debate suggest several reasons for funding debate programs on college campuses. First, debate training improves communication skills (analysis, delivery, and organization) and helps students in other communication situations. Second, debate promotes depth of educational experience by exposing students to important social issues of the time and by improving critical thinking ability. And, third, debate provides excellent preprofessional training through enabling students to gain experience in public speaking and to improve their skills in argumentation, organization, logic, and leadership. (EL)

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The Academic and Practical Values of Debating

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Training in debate has long been considered an educational process. Dunne, Mack, and Pruett (1971) noted the tradition when they wrote:

> Debate is a practical art. . .In addition to its mission of settling practical problems of criminal and civil trials, law making, settling of labor controversies and the like, or as a preliminary to such efforts, debate is also conducted for learning puposes. It sometimes hopes to give knowledge to an audience. On other occasions it also hopes to teach the performers better ways of debating. (p. 207)

Debate is a time honored part of the educational process, yet in this time of financial stress, many forensics directors have been asked to justify expenditures on their programs. We are frequently asked why debate should be funded on our campuses. This seems curious to those of us who recognize its long and honored place in academia. The reaction of many in our field is even more curious. Instead of constructing arguments like we teach our students, we have often assumed that others understood our importance. Our lack of preparation may be the result of the relative unavailability of materials to build such a defense. This article attempts to address this problem by reviewing some of the important data which supports the academic and practical values of debating.

While debate may allow a university to develop a reputa-

tion for competitive excellence, to recruit outstanding high school students and to be active in community life, its educational benefits for students would seem more immediatly relevant grounds for its defense. The literature suggests that debaters derive such benefits in at least three areas. First, forensic competition improves the students' communication skills. Second, forensics provides a unique educational experience because it promotes depth of study, complex analysis and focused critical thinking. Third, forensics offers excellent pre-professional preparation.

Debate training can significantly improve communication skills. A study by Semlak and Shields concluded that "students with debate experience were significantly better at employing the three communication skills (analysis, delivery, and organization) utilized in this study than students without the experience." (1977, p.194) Debate training not only improves speaking skills but also helps students in other communication situations. Group discussion and interpersonal skills are improved. Pollock's research suggests that "Persons with oral communication skills honed by varied forensic events were also regarded highly by their colleagues in group discussion activity. Virtually every legislator accorded high ratings in the basic category of interpersonal communication listed forensic experience as a student." (1982, p.17) Pollock concludes that "indeed a concrete justification of the values of forensics as a co-curricular activity in speech communication may be inferred from these survey results." (p.17)

Speech educators echo this praise for debate as an educational activity. Pearce's survey concluded, "attitudes toward forensics by those who teach speech communication in higher institutions are generally favorable." (1974, p. 139) The conclusion seems fairly simple, debate training is an excellent way of improving many communication skills. In our survey of the literature we found not one study or article that suggests any adverse results from debating. Patterson and Zarefsky (1983) summized:

> A. . .tool developed by using argumentation is communication skills. As advocates, we attempt to intrepret complex ideas for our listeners in oreder to persuade them to accept our position. In doing so, we must connect messages with puposes and audiences. Argumentation thus offers the kind of intellectual stimulation that results from the ability to handle complicated ideas and to communicate with others more successfully with others. One means to this end is a mastery of the variables in the communication process. The study of argument contributes to our understanding of communication through its emphasis on the generation and arrangement of persuasive appeals, the critical functions of audience analysis, and the adaptation of ideas to audiences. (p.314)

The second advantage of debate, mentioned repeatedly in the literature, is depth of educational experience. Our

goal as communication educators certainly should be to improve the communication abilities of our students. However, we also share the burden with our colleagues in other disciplines to provide an excellent educational experience for our students. Debate does this in two ways: introducing students to the social sciences and improving critical thinking ability.

Debate exposes students to in-depth analysis of many areas in the social sciences. Robinson explains, "[In just six years] high school and college debaters were introduced to such vital and contemporary issues as compulsory arbitration of labor disputes, world government, educational. . . reforms, price and wage controls, FEPC, tariff revision. . .Study and debate of such topics serves as an introduction to the social sciences for many undergraduates. . .I suspect that many an undergraduate relies on debating for his important contact with social science. . ." (1956 p.62) Many others have concurred. Ruf (1980) argued, ". . .teaching debate as a philosophy class can lead to consideration of extremely important issues in philosophy of language, logic, ethics, social philosophy, and philosophy of law." (p.170)

Exposure to the thinking of others on the important issues of our time is valuable but learning to think critically about these issues is even more important. Ehninger and Brockriede say that critical thinking is grounded in a careful examination and interpretation of relevant facts and values. It should reflect an awareness of options open, of consequences involved,

and of the steps required to put the elected alternative into effect. Patterson and Zarefsky (1983) further explained:

> . . .the study and use of argument helps us in our quest to acquire the accoutrement of intellectual freedom. One of these is critical thinking. Argumentation as a discipline demands attention to the laws of valid inference and warranted claims. It requires that conclusions be drawn from substantial premises, either as general truths extracted from particular cases or as particular propositions inferred from general laws. Argumentation is largely based on the cognitive skills required in these mental processes. The development of arguments, for example, encourages critical thinking because it consistly demands the questioning, examining, and restructuring of knowledge according to the laws of validity and warrant. (p. 13)

After reviewing the research on debate and improved critical thinking ability, Keefe, Harte and Norton concluded, "Many researchers over the past four decades have come to the same general conclusions. Critical thinking ability is significantly improved by courses in argumentation and debate and by debate experience." (1982, p. 33-34) The importance of critical thinking is best explained by Ehninger and Brockriede, "The function of debate is to enable men to make collective choices and decisions critically when inferential questions

become subjects for dispute . . . When collective choices and decisions require personal judgement as well as facts and figures, debate helps insure that these decisions will be made critically . . . . A critical decision is more 'human,' i.e., rational, than an uncritical one. The ability to arrive at decisions critically is the trait that chiefly distinguishes man from animal." (1963, p. 15)

Not only are academians aware of the importance of developing critical thinking, the public has expressed support for educators to enhance our student's cognitive processes. Lucas (1983) reported, ". . .a state wide poll released in 1983 by the Association of California School Administrators [which indicated] the public wants schools to pu more emphasis on developing students' thinking skills. In a 1982 Gallup poll, a majority of those polled felt that not enough attention was being paid to teaching students how to think. The public wants students to be better equipped to survive in today's fast changing world by learning to use a 'thinking process' that will help them make successful life decisions." (p. 1) Debate appears to offer the development of important cognitive skills which enhance the thinking process. Baron (1982) substanciated the importance of developing the 'thinking process'. He wrote, "Reflective thinking allows us to choose courses of action that succeed in attaining otherwise unattainable goals, and it makes us more likely to adopt true beliefs rather than false ones." (p. 293) In 1954, a report of the American Council on Education concluded:

> The good life in a democratic society. . .seems to rest fumdamentally on one's ability to think critically about problems with which [s/he] is confronted. The essence of the democratic creed is that each person posesses potentialities for discoverimg [his/her] own problems and for developing personally satisfactory and socially acceptable solutions to them, so that [s/he] has no need to defer completely to the will of an authority. . .(Dressel and Mayhew, p. 35)

The educational benefits of debate seem to be well documented: improved communication skills; exposure to important social issues of our time; improvement of critical thinking ability. If students benefit from debate, then we should find that debate is excellent pre-professional preparation. Indeed the support is strong for this third advantage.

The data suggesting that forensics is valuable to the pre-law student is overwhelming. McBath reported, "This survey indicated resounding approval of speech participation as a professional foundation and the endorsement of a public speaking and debate requirement." (1961, p. 47) Arnold found that, "of 94 Pennsylvania lawyers. . . 62% of the respondents with debate experience and 53% of the respondents without debate experience believe that debate should be recommended for all pre-legal students." (1974, p. 139) In a study of 98 law school deans, Swanson (1970) found that 69.9% would advise pre-law students to take courses in argumentation, and 70.3% recom-

mended participation in intercollegiate debate. The support from lawyers and law school administrators ranges from strong endorsement of debate for all pre-law students to a suggestion that it be required. This seems to make a stronger case than even we might propose. The reason for such support may be the professional success of former debaters.

Improved speaking ability seems to be a benefit that helps students when they enter professional life as well. Pollock extends his conclusions to the real world in a study which analyzed the speaking ability of state representatives with and without debate experience. Pollock (1982) concluded:

> In speculating what role the forensic activity plays in the attainment of oral communication success in legislative halls, some positive conclusions can be inferred. For example, the correlation ran high in this survey that the very top debaters and floor speakers in the Florida House of Representatives were also those who had previous experience in scholastic debate or public speaking-type forensic activity. (p. 17)

Huseman and Goodman provide testimonials from former debaters who have succeeded professionally that support this argument. Senator Dick Clark of Iowa stated, "The principal value of debate lies in the development of logical thought processes, and the ability to articulate your positions publicly." (1976, p. 226) Representative Charles E. Bennett of Florida concurred stating, "Debate not only improves one's ability to speak

publicly but improves the thinking process of the debater." (p. 226)

The excellence of debate as pre-professional training is acknowledged by those in business. Center reported, "The results of a recent survey of those responsible for hiring, for a variety of Midwest businesses, listed debating first among twenty other activities and academic specializations that an applicant might present on a resume. Debate was the overwhelming first choice of those responsible for recruiting and hiring for law firms. Moreover, debating was ranked very high by a wide variety of businesses." (1982, p. 5) A study reported by Sayer (1985) concluded, "It is important to note that positions in professional sales, the legal world, mid-management, and personnel work regard debate as a highly attractive and valued competency." (p. 16) Foard (1985) elaborated, "Law schools look for debaters for their argumentation skills. University graduate programs look for debaters for their organizational and logical skills. Businesses look for debaters because they can take a point and think on their feet to argue that point. Each career requires different skills but debate provides them all. . .In fact, debate can help in every field of business, science, or the arts." (p.12) In a time when many of our students ask us how educational activities will help them get a job, the answer seems to be unequivocal. Debate experience is highly valued by the business world.

The value placed on debate by business is well founded.

Former debaters tend to be very successful people. Keele and Matlon (1984) concluded that 90% of debaters have attained at least one graduate degree. Thirty per cent of their sample are university educators while another fifteen per cent are top ranking corporate executives. Ten per cent are now working in the executive or legislative branch of government. They suggest that these ratios do not vary between those who graduated 25 years ago and those who finished within the last five years. Sanders (1983) explained, "Beyond education, the persoanl development experience that is debate can be an excellent preparation ground for a profession. The professional fields of law, politics, government, religion, teaching, and many others are replete with former debaters. Many of our most important national leaders credit their rapid rise in poitics to the training received in debate. In fact, the late President Lyndon Johnson was a high school debate coach in Texas prior to entering the field of politics." (p. 4) It is doubtful that many other activities can boast of so many successful alumni.

It appears that debate develops leadership qualities in individuals. Freedom and Union reported that, "A survey of 160 senators, congressmen, governors, Supreme Court justices, Cabinet members, and other leaders revealed that 100 of the leaders said high school or college debate experience was helpful in their careers, and 90 classified the experience as 'greatly helpful' or 'invaluable.' Of the 60 who did not have debate experience, 26 expressed regret that they had not gone

out for the debating team while in high school or college." (1960, p. 6) Those who have become successful believe debate helped them succeed. Their success is recognized by educators, businesses and the debaters themselves. Those who did not have debate experience wish they had. It would seem difficult to imagine stronger support for any educational activity. Perhaps the reason we are asked to defend our activity is our own fault. The evidence is overwhelming and no negative evidence can be found. Have we taken for granted that others realize this? If so it's time we began to be advocates of our profession.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to document the chief educational benefits of academic debate. It is clear that the activity is not for everyone. Debate involves countless hours of research, preparation, and practice. However, former participants generally have good things to say about the activity and its results. The late Senator Church of Idaho commented, "As a former debater I know of the tremendous benefits which can be derived from the process of educating oneself to take part in discussions of vital national issues." (in Huseman and Goodman, 1976, p. 226)

Former President John F. Kennedy summed it up well "I think debating in high school and college a most valuable training whether for politics, the law, business, or for service on community committees such as the PTA and the League of

Women Voters. A good debater must not only study material in support of his own case, but he must also, of course, thoroughly analyze the expected arguments of his opponent. . . . The give and take of debating, the testing of ideas, is essential to democracy. I wish we had a good deal more debating in our institutions than we do now." (in Freedom and Union, 1960, p. 7)

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